

Like the last two weekends ... our Gospel reading today is taken from the Sermon on the Mount. We listened as we heard Jesus give example after example explaining that we must go beyond the letter of the law and obey the **spirit** of the law! I think we could probably all agree that our Savior sets the bar pretty high ... but **today** ... Jesus **really** pushes the envelope!

In our reading today, Jesus begins by **reminding** us of the law as laid down in Genesis: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" Now ... It sounds like this is a call for **revenge**! But nothing could be **further** from the truth! **No!** The idea behind this law was to **limit** vengeance. This law does not say that we should **seek** vengeance; instead what it says is that vengeance must not be **disproportionate**. Excessive revenge seems to be a natural tendency of humanity. But what the **law** demanded was this: If someone knocked your tooth out ... you were permitted to knock **one** ... **one and no more** ... of his teeth out. But even with this limited revenge, as Mohandas Gandhi once observed, "the world would eventually be filled with blind and toothless people!"

And we seem to be a people who seem to want retribution for every injury inflicted on us ... real or imagined. We are quick to sue. We trade insult for insult and injury for injury. We can nurse hatred and harbor grudges for years toward those who we believe have harmed us. But now Jesus teaches us that we must "offer **no** resistance ... to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the **other** one as well." Quoting from Leviticus, as we heard in our first reading, He reminds us that we are to love our neighbor and **that** ... is not all that **hard** to understand and accept. But then He goes further: "You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and **hate** your enemy. But I say to you, love your **enemies!**" He **even** tells us that we must **pray** for those who persecute us! Now Jesus' teaching **stops** making sense! "**No** resistance to one who is **evil?**" That is just **foolish!** Turn the other **cheek!** ... **Really?** "If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand over your **cloak** as well." In our litigious society ... these teachings just seem **insane!** If we followed them, someone could just ask for things until they had everything we own and we would be left naked,

homeless and starving! There would be no limit on how much we let people take advantage of us. Why ... any group of people who tried to follow these teachings would soon die **out!** When we hear this price of Christian discipleship, many probably say ... at least inwardly ...: “Lord, you’re going **too** far! You’re asking too much! To live like that would make us **fools.**” Every **ounce** of human logic and wisdom we possess tells us these teachings are illogical and completely impossible!

And therein lies the problem ... **human** logic and wisdom ... in other words ... the wisdom of the ... **world!** Living, as we are, in a world where we are constantly bombarded by television and movies where the values **Jesus** teaches are **never** demonstrated ... and the idea of revenge and getting **even** are presented as both normal and admirable, it is no **wonder** that we are conditioned to find the notions Jesus teaches foolish and unworkable! Even among Christians, few have ever been ready to live according to this spiritual ethic. A quick look at any morning newscast will soon confirm that this is a teaching of Jesus that is widely ignored. But St. Paul urges us, in our second reading, to become **fools** so that we may become wise ... wise **not** in the wisdom of the **world** ... but in the wisdom of God! Paul goes on to affirm: “the wisdom of this world is **foolishness** in the eyes of God!” ... ..

Even as far back as Leviticus the Lord told us: “Be holy, for I, the LORD, your God, am holy”. Jesus tells us: “be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It seems crystal clear! The Christian’s mission is nothing **less** than to attain perfection. But how are we to do this when our human wills are so very weak and our world bombards us with such **contrary** values? On our own this is **impossible!** But ... we are **not** on our own! To fulfill what Jesus asks of us requires grace and that grace is ours ... if we will but **ask** for it ... if we will but sincerely **pray** for it! After all Jesus has not asked anything of us that **He** was unwilling to do ... as we will recall when we relive His passion and death in just a few short weeks. This perfection Jesus demands is a life-long journey! Lent begins Wednesday. Might I suggest that this Lent might be a wonderful time to begin. May I also suggest a good first step might be to **pray** ... for those who have offended you ... and ... for those **you** have offended. I think you will discover that it is very hard to **hate** ... someone you are praying for!